Since When?

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Summary

The table was sticky. Syrup of some kind. Derek sort of hated that, but no place else was open this late at night, and Mark insisted that he needed regular infusions of caffeine and carbohydrates if he was going to cram like this.

Notes

Originally posted to livejournal many moons ago. I'm simply archiving it here.

I've decided on the early 90s to set this in, in lieu of knowing a specific timeline for the boys' college experience (not that it matters a great deal; I'm not putting them in stonewashed jeans or anything). Yes, I'm aware that Eric Dane is a good deal younger than Patrick Dempsey; you have to fudge his age anyway (and canon!) to put Mark in college with Derek, so just go with it.

The table was sticky. Syrup of some kind. Derek sort of hated that, but no place else was open this late at night, and Mark insisted that he needed regular infusions of caffeine and carbohydrates if he was going to cram like this. He'd also insisted on Derek's presence, and even though he did so with a glare, it wasn't necessary: Derek was well aware of how much he was in his friend's debt.

At least it was warm inside the diner. Derek leaned his elbow up on the window sill for a moment, watching his breath fog the glass, but it left him with a chill, so he resituated himself in the booth, sliding back over to the middle…where he had been about ten minutes ago. It was remarkable: as tired as he was, he couldn't sit still. He sure as hell couldn't concentrate. He was honestly surprised Mark could, but the man kept his head down, and Derek sometimes found himself distracted for whole minutes at a time watching his full lips purse and his eyebrows knit themselves together as he frowned at the book and notebook in front of him.

Derek had just forced his eyes back to his own notebook when Mark sighed, and he felt his legs knock against the underside of the seat as he stretched them out.

"So," Mark said, "I have an idea. Something we can do tomorrow morning. Save us a lot of grief."

"I'm not taking your organic final," Derek muttered.

Mark slumped down in the booth, his head thudding against it as he sighed again. "Man, this is fucking stupid."

"And my fault," Derek said without looking up. "We established that about…" He checked his watch, and it made him sigh, rub his face.

"What?"

"It's 3:45."

"God damn. Come on, D. In about four hours, you're gonna fail a music appreciation final I could ace in my sleep."

"You had music apprec like…so long ago I don't even remember."

"Whatever," Mark replied gloomily.

Derek was always amazed to see Mark's face cloud over the way it did just then. Normally, when he was being the Mark everyone saw everyday—as he shot the shit with his buddies who'd gone Greek or as he pulled girl after girl by the hand through the dorm to his room—he wore a warm, slightly mischievous grin. Always in control; always skating right over the top of everything. Derek was almost sure he was the only one who got to see this dark and moody side of the semi-legendary Mark Sloan. He could be as petulant as a five year old if the mood suited him; he could also be downright nasty if you pissed him off. Thankfully, that afternoon he'd only touched on pissed off and gone straight into petulant and then snarky, choosing to channel his frustration into mocking jabs rather than outright snippiness. Obviously, though, the petulance was always right there at the surface.

Derek said, "It wouldn't be a fair trade, anyway."

"Oh, you care about fairness now. Now that it's not your ass—"

"I offered to help you study."

Mark cast his face down, although Derek could still see him roll his eyes as he muttered, "You obviously have no idea how bossy you are when you 'help' someone do anything."

"I am not."

"You are." He didn't look up, but he let a smile creep over his face as he said, "Maybe that's why she dumped you."

Derek felt a wave of uneasiness sweep over him. Unhappiness, maybe. Without dignifying Mark's latest dig with a response, he slid himself out of the booth and dug in his pocket for quarters as he shuffled over to the jukebox.

Nobody else was in the diner except a waitress and a cook, and both looked like they had seen and heard so much over the years that some slightly loud and obnoxious music wouldn't faze them in the slightest. That was good—he was really only interested in fazing Mark. Derek's eyes scanned for Motley Crue or Poison, the louder, more obnoxious elements of his music collection. The best he could come up with was Bon Jovi. It would have to do.

As Derek went back to their booth, he thought about why he'd gotten up in the first place. It was odd, really, but in the harsh light of day, he wasn't as upset as he might've been about Julia dumping him. Maybe that was it: he was upset because he should've been but wasn't. He didn't let himself at all think about the reason for the *wasn't*, especially not whether that reason might've had something to do with the guy sitting hunched over a booth at four in the morning, trying desperately not to fail his organic chemistry final.

As Derek crawled back into the booth, putting his back to the window, Jon Bon Jovi's voice finally came out over the western-sounding instrumental ramble of "Blaze of Glory."

Mark glared at him. "I hate you."

Derek smiled, but he let that smile widen, become a little friendlier as the waitress drifted over to wordlessly refill their coffee cups.

Once she was gone, Mark laid his head back again. He said, "So, are you a 'devil on the run' or a 'six gun lover'?"

In reply, Derek quoted the next lyric: "A candle in the wind."

Mark snorted, then a moment later he said, "Who the hell is he kidding? 'I'm a goat in your stable, I'm what—?'"

"Colt."

"Not goat?"

Derek snorted and shook his head.

Mark groused, "Still lame. 'I'm what Cain was to Abel'?"

"'Mister, catch me if you can.'"

"You are possibly the most tragically uncool person I know."

Derek nodded and attempted to return his eyes and his thoughts to his notes. It worked pretty well for all of thirty seconds, until Mark suddenly sat up.

"You know what I could use right about now?" When Derek looked up at him, he smiled wickedly. "A couple of shots of your good buddy

Jack Daniels. Sure seems to put you in a thinking frame of mind."

That? One snide remark too many.

"One fucking—" Derek snapped, quickly lowering his voice to an irritated hiss. "One night! One night I have a bad night. How many times have I played DD or run interference with the fucking campus police for your bad nights? And that time last fall—"

"Yeah, yeah. The infamous B minus on the English lit exam."

"You permanently damaged my GPA."

Mark rolled his eyes, his entire head. "Oh, Jesus, you're such a martyr. It's like you get off on it or something. It was your own damn fault. You need to learn to say no. You could've kicked my ass out of your room that night."

"And make you sleep where? The lumpy love seat in the lounge?"

"Sure."

"Yeah? Well, why didn't you put *me* there last night if I was so annoying? Hell, I was in my own room, so why didn't you just leave?"

"Maybe I don't stress out over grades like you do."

"Since when?"

"Since always."

"Then maybe you should shut up about this organic final, huh?"

Mark glared at him, jerked himself up and out of the seat, and plodded over to the jukebox. It upset Derek just a little, but probably only because he hated it when anybody was mad at him, especially someone he pretty much considered his best friend. It would be a lot more than *pretty much* if they didn't have such fucking different lives. Or, more importantly (for Derek, anyway), if he didn't feel a little jolt of desperation every time he was around him. It was exhausting pushing that back so that he couldn't feel it.

Derek forced his eyes back to his notes. Brahms. 1833. Hamburg. Romantic. 1833. Hamburg. The bathroom door banged shut after a

minute or two, and Derek gave the waitress an apologetic look, but she just shrugged and went back to refilling sugar dispensers.

Mark was being a grouchy bastard, but that was hardly new. He always got like that during finals, and this semester was no exception. He didn't particularly like having to forgo pretending like he didn't give a shit about school. It must've been exhausting to keep up an active social life and still manage to stay near the top of your class. Derek wouldn't know.

Derek could blame it on exams all he wanted, but he knew exactly why Mark was acting weird, and it had to do with end-of-semester anxiety only in passing. Even if he knew the problem, though, he was puzzled as to why it had taken the form it had. He'd expected to be slugged the night before, but he hadn't been. This afternoon, he'd expected some discussion of the matter, either that or an outright proposition. Mark's fist in his face was still a possibility, actually. But what he got was Mark attempting to behave as though nothing happened the night before, as though Derek hadn't leaned him into the door and kissed him soft and wet, long enough for Mark to open up to it and kiss him back.

Mark's reaction since had been remarkably similar to Mark's reaction then: he had wordlessly pushed him back, one hand on his chest and the other held out for his keys. He patiently watched as Derek wrestled them out of his pocket, then he unlocked the door and dumped him on the bed. Looking back, Derek should have expected him to leave, but he didn't; he took up his usual spot in the window seat, watching the foot traffic outside, and listened to Derek ramble for maybe as much as an hour, about women and school and life. Mostly women. Mark didn't really say much, but Derek realized later that he hadn't needed him to. He just needed him there.

After some time, Derek decided he should probably go and throw up or else his body would make that decision for him later anyway. Mark was still there when he came back from the community bathroom, and also when Derek woke up the next morning, feeling like absolute shit, as much for the stupid risk of that kiss as for the excess of alcohol. But Mark didn't say anything about either indiscretion. He'd obviously slept on Derek's roommate's empty bed, on top of the covers, but when Derek woke up, he was already awake, propped up and reading over a textbook. Quickly, though, he disappeared, mumbling something like *thank god for essay exams.*

Derek had been sitting in the hallway outside of his room when he got back. He said he was sorry and meant it. He hadn't known Mark still had exams; Mark hadn't told him. But he told him there in the hallway: not just psych, which he'd taken that morning, but also organic chemistry, a class in his major. He was supposed to take the exam the next day. He'd studied a lot already, and he'd managed to get in a bit more while he was watching over Derek, but not as much as he'd liked, not to get some of the final confusions worked out.

He said nothing about the kiss, even if he otherwise talked at length about Derek's behavior the night before. Derek was almost afraid he'd imagined it. Even if he hadn't, it would probably be better to—apparently, that was Mark's strategy: act like nothing had happened, so certainly nothing had changed. Derek couldn't help feeling like that kind of avoiding could only last so long.

Before Mark could get out of the bathroom, the Bon Jovi was over and the song played that Mark had cued up. After a moment, Derek recognized the strains of The Bangles, "Eternal Flame."

When Mark shuffled back to the table, looking less stormy but still not himself, Derek said, "You're hilarious."

Mark smiled at that, but the expected volley of banter didn't come. He simply pronounced: "Pancakes."

"Again?"

"Why not?"

"No way."

When Mark went over to the counter and ordered his second stack of pancakes that night, Derek couldn't tell if the cook was glad for the diversion or annoyed. As he set about noisily preparing the food, Mark and Derek seemed to hit a groove studying, remaining quiet through the barrage of mopey songs that Mark had rather mischievously chosen to further rib him about his breakup. He stoically endured Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time" and Poison's "Every Rose Has Its Thorn," the latter of which he couldn't really say anything about without taking a lot of shit from Mark. However, as the opening strains of "With or Without You" floated out of the jukebox, Derek sighed, sat back, and when Mark looked up at him, grinning, Derek flipped him the bird.

Mark smiled, his eyes somehow sparkling despite his exhaustion. "Thorns. A bed of nails, even."

"Fuck you."

Mark was about to retort, perhaps further injure a perfectly beautiful U2 song with his mockery, when the waitress brought over his stack of pancakes. He contented himself with smirking at Derek as he drowned the plate in syrup. Derek did some more rather unsuccessful surveying of his music appreciation notes as Mark shoveled forkfuls of pancake into his mouth. He appeared to be trying to study, too, squinting and frowning at a chain of carbons and occasionally scribbling at his notebook.

A few minutes later, as Mark let his fork clatter to a mostly empty plate and pushed it to the edge of the table, he sat back again. Derek found himself anxious to stop reading, too, to look up at him.

When Derek's eyes caught Mark's for a little too long, Mark said seriously, "You seem…better now. Than you were earlier. Last night."

"Yeah."

Then he chuckled warmly. "Three weeks, dude."

Derek found his mouth curving up into a smile despite his best efforts. "Yeah."

"I just… I don't get you and this drunk-ass mopey crap over a girl you knew *three weeks*."

Derek kept his eyes on his book. He couldn't concentrate when Mark grinned at him like that. Not that not looking helped, really. He mumbled, "Known her all semester."

"Well, then."

"We can't all ensnare a new woman every weekend."

"Ensnare?"

"Lure? Woo?"

He snorted. "Well, we're not all me. If we were, you would've been able to hold your liquor better than that, my friend. You're the relationship sort. I get that. But three weeks, dude?"

For no good reason, Mark's amusement and his confusion at Derek's emotions were suddenly starting to kind of…piss him off? Derek pursed his lips. "I'm over it," he snapped.

He risked at glance at Mark's face, then, and he found that he'd reacted to that tone just like he thought he might—with an scowl. But he didn't expect his next retort, snide and dark: "Yeah, I got that."

"What?" He felt his stomach flop.

"Nothing," Mark replied. He had suddenly shifted into his please-drop-it tone, the one he typically used right before he made Derek wish he'd dropped it. Not that Derek ever did. Not even now, when he knew what was coming.

Maybe he just wanted it to come.

"Mark, what? It's too late—or too fucking early—for being passive-aggressive."

Mark took a deep breath and let it out. Derek could see him deliberating: shouldn't I just let things be?

But Mark was his friend for a lot of reasons, the least of which that they were way too alike. He didn't know how to let things be, either. It might've been comforting that he looked just as nervous as Derek felt, but it really wasn't.

Mark leaned forward, finally, and said, "Last night. You don't even remember, do you? We're coming up the elevator, and you get all spooky, stop talking. I think you're gonna cry or puke or something. Then…" Mark shook his head. He let his eyes fasten to Derek's for a little too long before he bowed his head, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck.

Derek heart made a thump in his chest and began to beat insistently, throbbing and making a roar in his ears. He'd already paused too long. He couldn't make up a lie now. Probably, he didn't really want to.

So he said, "I remember."

Mark raised his head and his eyebrows shot up as his eyes went wide. Derek just nodded. Mark's eyes left his again, and Derek watched him run his finger along the edge of his plate. It dragged against a spot of syrup, and he brought it up to his mouth, sucking softly, acting a little like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him, like if he didn't look at Derek, Derek wouldn't be there and they wouldn't have to deal with this, whatever the hell it was or meant.

Derek had no fucking idea what to do. How much damage had he caused? Maybe he should've lied. He could've said he had no idea what he was talking about. Maybe he was drunk and being stupid. Maybe he was miserable and lonely and he would've come onto anybody. Of course, none of that was the case, except perhaps the Derek was, indeed, miserable and lonely. Last night, he simply got too physically close to Mark when his inhibitions were down, when there was nothing to tell him how bad an idea it was for him to want what he wanted. He'd had the overwhelming urge to twine his body around Mark's and feel how warm and hard and perfect he was. He would've done it, too, if Mark hadn't stopped him.

He wanted to touch him now, as a matter of fact, but he didn't dare so much as move.

Mark finally replied softly, "You can't just do that."

"Sorry," Derek said.

Mark's head snapped up, and he looked skeptical, or maybe he was confused. "What for?"

"It was out of line. I don't know what made me think that you could want…"

"Who said I didn't?"

Derek felt a breath catch in his throat and he couldn't respond at first. Then he said, "But you've been… all day."

"You, too."

"I really thought you were trying to forget."

Mark snorted softly and cocked his head to the side. "Well, I thought

you already had."

"No way," Derek said, and he felt a silly smile come over his face.

At that, Mark bowed his head, but not before Derek could see him blushing furiously. Now that—that was remarkable. The smile on Mark's face was nothing at all like the one he wore when he was making time with a potential conquest. It had none of that sharpness or barely-concealed artificiality. This was a smile more like the one his face glowed with when he was around Lisa or Lark or one of those other girls that made him start saying foolish things about*exclusive* and *Dammit, you jokers are always saying I'm such a fucking booty hound. I just don't have any reason not to be* and *Maybe she's enough reason*.

Maybe, Derek thought, this was enough reason to be nervous as hell.

When Mark looked up again, however, he was grinning at him like the guy who kicked his ass in touch football. Somehow, though, he was still asking him with his eyes if it was okay for them to talk about it. Derek tried to smile back; it was too late not to talk about it, and he'd be damned if they let things get too weird.

Mark said, "You're a sloppy kisser, you know."

"I was drunk."

With a subdued but distinctly seductive grin, Mark mumbled, "Didn't say I minded."

Out of the corner of his eye, Derek saw the waitress approaching, and he found that he was absurdly glad. His heart was still beating up against his ribs as they waited silently for her to finish pouring. She took Mark's plate away, and Derek realized that as difficult as it had been to know what to do before, when he thought he'd made Mark angry or somehow permanently damaged their friendship, it was damn near impossible to know what to do about Mark maybe… wanting him?

When the waitress had gone back behind the counter, Derek looked up to find Mark studying again. There was tension between them, but it seemed so much easier than it had before, with everything unspoken. Maybe they didn't need to figure things out right now. It was a really, really bad time to be making decisions. Or to be deciding if there were

even decisions to be made.

Or maybe it was just that Derek didn't want to know, not just yet.

Derek needed to do something besides stare at his music notes. Something more taxing, a distraction.

He said to Mark, "Show me the problem you've been reworking over and over for the last half hour."

"Have not."

"Yeah. You have."

"Not my fault," he mumbled.

"I know."

This time Mark muttered it under his breath, and it made Derek even more antsy: "You really have no idea."

Derek reached across the table and took the paper from his hands. He prayed he could remember this shit well enough to figure out what was hanging him up. He did, miraculously, and he leaned over the table and silently pointed it out to Mark, who recognized his mistake immediately.

Mark was leaned over the table, too, and as he took the paper back, his on fingers brushed Derek's palm, just incidentally. It made Mark all but jerk his hand away as well as nervously sit back and shift his legs around. When he found that they slipped against Derek's, he didn't move them, so one rested against Derek's. Mark opened his mouth to babble like he tended to when he was nervous, or to be self-deprecating like he was anytime Derek made him look like a moron—or maybe to do both at once. But Derek preempted it by suddenly getting up, his legs knocking against Mark's as he slid out of the booth. He mumbled something about the bathroom, not that Mark didn't know exactly why he was running.

He locked the bathroom door behind him and leaned into it, his palms pressed flat against it. He didn’t get it. The man was not shy. In fact, he was assertive enough that it was regularly annoying. Derek had been able to feel the heat radiating off of him and see the way he fidgeted, his hands worrying the edge of the table. Derek couldn't

make good sense of his own behavior; Mark's, then, was downright mystifying.

He honestly didn't know what to do, but if nothing else, he thought he needed to calm the fuck down. Breathe or something. Mark would talk when he wanted to talk. Derek stood at the sink, looking into the mirror, wondering how long he could plausibly hide out in the bathroom before he looked like a fucking coward.

Derek was washing his hands when he was startled by the door swinging open. Mark came in and stood in the doorway, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"You are a fucking frustrating human being," he said.

Derek turned to yank out a paper towel from the dispenser, answering without looking at him. "Yeah?"

"For such an emotional asshole, you're really… You know, girls are never this hard to read."

There it was again, that nervous feeling that touched off his adrenaline and made him a little shaky. Giddy laughter rose to lips, too: Mark might easily have been talking about himself.

Derek could've laughed it off; instead, he said, "If you're waiting for me to make a—"

With no warning, Mark closed the gap between them with one long stride and grabbed him by the sides of the face and kissed him hard on the lips, like the best sort of challenge.

Almost instantly, Derek pressed his palms flat against Mark's chest, turning him and pushing him up against the wall beside the sink, kissing him deeply as he fit his body as tightly against Mark's as he could. He tasted like sour coffee with just a hint of sweet maple, and when he grabbed him in return, and it was nothing at all like pushing him away.

As Mark's hands came down over his ass and yanked him closer, Derek suddenly felt even more shaky, maybe a bit frantic, but not the sort of panic that made him want to stop. He could feel the same energy coming from Mark, in the grip of his hands and in the way his chest heaved with each breath. Derek eagerly shoved one thigh up between

Mark's thighs, and he couldn't help but grind his cock into his hip bone, only to feel Mark's cock hardening, too, against his own thigh.

If it was even possible, that made him even more freaked out, this thing that had only ever been theoretical for him, but it was somehow okay because Mark had sighed a little into the kiss, and Derek felt himself sort of melt at that and at how Mark brought his hands up, tangled them in Derek's hair, and tugged, angling his head for better access. Mark gave a low growl as Derek's hips worked against his, their erections only nudging together as they rutted against each other's thighs. But it was enough.

Mark suddenly pulled his face away. They were both gasping for breath and trying desperately to look like they weren't.

"Wait, wait, wait," he said.

"Sorry," Derek replied.

"No. Shit. Don't do that. That's not what I meant."

"Then what?" Derek felt his chest squeeze as he sucked in a breath and held it, waiting. His face came to rest in the hollow of Mark's throat, but as Mark's neck rolled a little and he squirmed at the contact, Derek found that he could breathe again. He opened his lips and let his tongue dart out; Mark whimpered and it made his hands tighten on Derek's neck, but he didn't pull away.

Derek liked the taste of his skin, even if it was startling and strange to find his cheek, his lips, his tongue scraping over stubble. One of his hands fell to Mark's chest, and he could feel his heart thumping wildly, just as much as his own was. But it was nothing compared to the throb in his own cock. He really wanted to just unabashedly grind against him, but they were both hesitant. The lazy rolling of their hips was almost too much anyway.

Mark mumbled again, "Wait." He forced Derek's head back so he could look in his eyes. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"With what?" Derek said with a grin.

"Dammit, I'm—"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

Mark let out a shallow breath, chuckling nervously. "This is crazy, right? I mean, this is absolutely the dumbest thing I've ever done?"

"But you want to?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "Fucking hell. Are you that stupid?"

"No. But apparently you are." He rocked his hips just a little harder and forced their cocks together. Mark's eyes fluttered closed and he pulled Derek tighter as he let out a gasp of air.

Derek said firmly, "This has been a lot longer than three weeks. For me."

When Mark opened his eyes again, he looked a little bewildered, but he was smiling, and his blue eyes were so deep and warm Derek sort of lost his breath for a moment.

Then Mark sort of shifted against him, nervous, anxious in a good way, and absolutely grinned. Low, in a gravelly tone that somehow made the tension in Derek's gut worse—better—he said, "Remember how you asked me why I always come to your room when I'm wasted?"

He didn't wait for an answer; he just kissed Derek again, and it was different this time, more frantic but also more careful, considered. Deep. Mark's hands threaded up into his hairline and massaged at his scalp as his lips left Derek's and trailed down over his jaw. Derek felt awkward with his hands, not knowing what to do with them except hold Mark against the wall, which was… *God*. But as Mark's mouth opened against his adam's apple and his lips followed a wet, torturously slow path up to his ear, Derek's hands slipped down until he was working them up under Mark's shirt, rubbing flat over his abs. Soon, his fingers curled into his waistband, and he could already feel how hot Mark was, his skin damp with sweat. Mark shivered as Derek's fingers grazed the bare head of his cock, already poking out of his boxers.

Mark kissed him harder as Derek fumbled with his zipper, finally pulling him out and taking him tentatively in hand. If it was weird to do that, he didn't have long to think about it. He just began stroking him, slow and rough. Mark's hips jerked toward his hand, and he broke the kiss to exhale warm breath against Derek's shoulder. He

watched down between them at Derek's hands slipping over his cock, but after a moment, after he regained his composure a bit, he was scrambling to get Derek's pants unbuttoned, too.

Derek gave a little grunt as Mark's hands closed around him and pulled him out of his boxers, and apparently that was enough to make Mark let go of a moan he was holding back. Everything became a blur of hands jerking at awkward angles and bodies shaking, thrusting, wiggling against each other as they grunted out noises of astonishment and finally simply lust.

Mark kept trying to kiss him again, but Derek couldn't even breathe much less pretend to make his mouth work. But as he felt himself almost at the point of coming, so close he gasped out a warning, he found that he really wanted to be kissing Mark again, so he smashed their mouths back together and thrust his tongue inside. Mark's tongue thrust back, and Derek was coming hard, leaking out all over his hand, a heat throbbing all over his body and then a warm wash of relief. After a few more jerks, his body came to rest against Mark's, and he was absentmindedly sucking at Mark's neck when Mark closed his hand around Derek's on his cock and brought himself off with half a dozen jerks, exhaling Derek's name against his jaw as he did.

Afterward, it was a little awkward, but really only because there was just the one sink. Derek tucked himself back into his pants and Mark scrubbed at his hands first. Mark's expression was inscrutable as he buttoned his jeans again and watched Derek go to the sink.

"Derek?"

Derek kept his eyes on the faucet, the water, his hands. "Yeah?"

"I don't know what this means."

"That's all right. Neither do I, honestly."

"But we're okay…right?"

At that, the unusually tentative sound of Mark's voice, Derek finally looked at him again. He said, "Aren't we?"

Mark smiled and paused there for a long moment, then he started to push the door open. Almost instantly, he stopped.

He said, "You go out first."

"Oh. Yeah."

When Derek came back out into the fluorescent world of the diner, he was a little dazed. If he'd been even half awake, he would've worried about looking like he'd just had an orgasm in the bathroom, but he simply wandered like a zombie over to their table, collected their things, and paid the tab.

Outside, it was still dark. It was almost dawn, but he could see no hints of it in the sky yet. And it was cold as hell, or at least cold for southern California, but even if he should've gotten into the car to knock out some of the wind, he felt like he needed to meet Mark standing up, face to face.

After a few minutes, Mark came out and crossed the parking lot slowly, his gaze flitting all around but always coming back to Derek.

"I take it we're done studying?" he called out as he approached.

"We weren't anymore, not really. Besides, I can't even make my eyes focus anymore."

"Me either," Mark said as he stepped up in front of him, just outside his personal space but hovering close.

"What?"

Mark just stared at him for the longest time, blue eyes wide open in the semi-dark. At last, he tilted Derek's chin up with his fingers and gave him a quick peck on the mouth.

Derek held his breath, waiting to see what it was all about, but Mark just backed up a step and said casually, "You okay to drive?"

Derek nodded, so Mark went around to his side of the car, climbing in before Derek could even make himself move again.

The back streets to campus were deserted. The radio was on some top 40 station, so low Derek could only faintly hear it. Mostly, the world seemed very quiet, just the dull whoosh of tires over pavement and the occasional quiet squeak of brakes as they pulled up to a red light. It seemed like they were already miles from the bright, warm, tense

world they'd just been in. This seemed a lot less complicated, somehow. Calm and easy. Derek knew that was crazy, really, but he was so sleepy he decided he would just accept it.

It didn't stop his thoughts from circling wildly, though. Inevitably, they took him back to a moment he apparently should have paid more attention to—or at least put more stock in, because he had to admit that he'd thought about it quite a lot, actually.

Derek broke the silence. He was curious. "Do you remember freshman year, the time you lost your keys at the Lambda party?"

"Yeah. I mean, no. Not really."

"I didn't think so. Well, when I got there, you were too drunk to walk on your own. I honestly thought I'd have to take you in to the emergency room that time." He smiled. "But your lips worked just fine."

Mark's eyes went wide. "Don't tell me I kissed you? Our freshman year?"

"No. But you told me you wanted to. Until today, I thought it was just…" He shrugged, then he raised his eyebrows.

"Jesus, we're ridiculous," Mark sighed.

"Speak for yourself. At least I got home that night with my underwear and both my shoes."

"Oh," Mark said with a wide grin. "That party."

Their drive once again fell into a friendly silence, until they pulled up to the long stoplight crossing the main drag near campus.

As the car came to rest, Mark said, "Why aren't you freaking out?"

"Huh?"

"That's what you do: freak out about things. You panic and I tell you to fucking stop already."

"We can freak out at ten, when the exams are over."

"Okay. Because… Dude, I think we just jerked each other off in a bathroom."

Derek looked over to find Mark looking bewildered, but with a smile on his face. When Derek grinned in return, Mark's smile loosened up a bit.

Derek said, "Like you've never gotten anybody off in a bathroom before."

"Like you *have*."

"Shut up."

"Bite me."

"Plan to," Derek said with a competitive leer.

"Plan?" Mark said, his eyes going wide again, even if he tried to cover it up.

Derek laughed. "You really are gonna freak out at ten, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"Maybe," he said a little too seriously, but he couldn't take back the tone. "Should I?"

"Well, only one of us can. Isn't that usually how it works?"

Derek nodded. He took a breath, then he said, "I don't think it's going to be me this time. I'm cool."

Mark was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "You're cool?"

"Yeah," Derek replied sincerely.

Mark snorted and stole a glance at him. After a beat, he said, "Only one problem, D."

"Yeah?"

"You kinda suck at calming me down."

Derek felt a lazy, mischievous smile come to his lips, and it frankly shocked him. "Who said I wanted you calm," he mumbled.

Mark didn't respond, but after a moment he turned a little in his seat and let his gaze fall heavy on Derek's face. Derek didn't look—he didn't dare—but he could feel it. And he could picture it. He'd seen Mark's predatory grin enough times to imagine it quite clearly now.

Of course, having it aimed at him was an entirely different story. It gave him a new appreciation for just what sort of stupid all those flavor-of-the-week girls were—the absolutely unavoidable kind of stupid that comes with warm blue eyes and a rough voice and enough charm to render a person senseless.

At least it was preferable to the kind of stupid of the Lisas and Larks who could've had the man—really had him—but let him go. If Mark let him, and he had to remind himself that that was a big *if*, Derek wouldn't make the same mistake. If he knew nothing else about this new thing between them, at least he knew that.

Not that he let himself think about it, not just yet. 10 o'clock was still a long way off.

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